AN INTERNATIONAL APPROACH TO HOMELESSNESS. PART II. SLUMS DEMOLITION OR UPGRADING?

Międzynarodowe podejście do problemu bezdomności. Część II. Likwidacja slumsów czy ich usprawnienie?

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Abstract

In search of the best approach to eradicating homelessness in underdeveloped countries with large populations, we conducted interviews with professionals involved in different models of helping the unhoused. Although it has been established that the Housing First model combined with human services is the best model to end homelessness, the cost of housing might be prohibitive for many national governments. In situations where governments are overwhelmed by the numbers of homeless people, communities and organizations develop specific methods and practices to meet the needs of unhoused individuals. For the purpose of this paper, phenomenological research was undertaken to learn how societies in different countries respond to homelessness. We examined how international cooperation and assistance might be a potential support or a hindrance, and evaluated the practicality of international voluntarism. Social responses to homelessness in different countries were studied, and the role of the local culture on the choices of practice methods was evaluated. The importance of an asset-based community approach in developing organic social programs was also demonstrated. The findings suggest that community assets and resources should be utilized by national programs to support access to safe housing.

Streszczenie

W pracy przedstawiono wyniki badań dotyczących metod radzenia sobie z bezdomnością w krajach rozwijających się z dużą gęstością zaludnienia. Powszechnie uznaje się, że najlepszą metodą wyjścia z bezdomności jest model „Najpierw mieszkanie", ale wysoka cena tego podejścia uniemożliwia jego wykorzystanie przez państwa o ograniczonych budżetach. W warunkach niskiego poziomu dochodów państwa wiele organizacji pozarządowych i komunalnych tworzy systemy pomocy osobom bezdomnym, korzystając z własnych zasobów. Aby ustalić, jak taka pomoc jest organizowana, przeprowadziliśmy badania fenomenologiczne w każdym z badanych w tej pracy krajów. Szczególną uwagę poświęciliśmy pomocy dostarczanej przez kraje rozwinięte w formie narzuconej współpracy lub w ramach międzynarodowego wolontariatu. W badaniach uwzględnialiśmy wpływ lokalnych tradycji kulturowych na wybór metod i praktyk społecznych. Zwróciliśmy uwagę na rozwój społeczny i ekonomiczny oparty na zasobach poszczególnych środowisk lokalnych. Obserwacje te doprowadziły nas do wniosku, że lokalne zasoby mogą być istotnym czynnikiem rozwoju organicznych metod radzenia sobie z bezdomnością.

Introduction

The most frequently applied method of helping people who are unhoused or at risk of homelessness is the provision of public housing that offers subsidized lodging. However, there are always limits and conditions on when and how people might receive such accommodation. Individuals who are unable to obtain housing support, after utilizing and eventually exhausting all their potentially available resources, find themselves living on the street. Then they have to search for accessible shelter where they are able to find relative safety, rest, and food. The simplest way is to find shelter in slums among people with similar needs and resources. However, this exposes them to significant health concerns due to poor sanitization and overcrowding [1]. Our experiences from studying the case of India (Part I) prompt several questions: What does "ending homelessness" really mean for the survival of slums? Should slums be demolished, as they will not be needed? Unfortunately, as we learned from such an approach in India, physical destruction of slums simply pushes more people into living on the street. Part I of our work concludes with a vision of communities taking care of their poor. In this second part, models of cooperation aimed at creating sustainable social change that may lead to the elimination of homelessness are examined.

Goals and methods

It is generally accepted that improvements in public programs designed to help the unhoused increase program expenditures. Although advocates for change say that improvements will lower long-term costs of services for unhoused people [2], short-term expenditures will increase. This seems to be true in the United States, where both housing and the work of professionals are becoming very expensive. The transfer of ideas and knowledge on how to eradicate homelessness from the United States to other countries such as India seems impracticable due to the high cost of the methods described as evidence-based practices in the American context. As noted in Part I, the best methods to eliminate homelessness are based on the application of the Housing First model, together with simultaneous health promotion and efforts to address social disparities [3].

In the search for the best model of affordable housing for countries like India, we decided to study how other low-income countries with limited resources and a large unhoused populations address homelessness. Primary and secondary sources were used to investigate the best methods to eliminate homelessness, and field visits enabled direct observation of professional practice in the field of homelessness in some of the countries of our interest. The methodological approach in essence followed the principles of phenomenological research to answer basic questions about the status quo of homelessness in each of the environments studied.

During the research process, we noticed that each topic that we stumbled on, relevant to our goal, is studied within its own specialty. Very seldom did we find discussion concerning overlapping topics. The topics listed below address specific aspects of the problem, issues related to the existence of slums, their origins, and potential eradication:

- Research and science of architecture and functional city [4–6].
- International cooperation and assistance [7].
- Asset-Based Community Development [8, 9].
- Practicality of international volunteerism [10].

Differences in the cultures of the people studying the problem and those directly experiencing it, such as the cultural dimensions of individualism versus collectivism [11].

Our investigation of the best approaches to eradicating homelessness drew on all of the above areas of research, as they provide a foundation for community development in an age of globalization.

During our visits to different countries, we interviewed individuals directly involved in community development and working toward improving standards of living for their most vulnerable populations. We were able to collect information from numerous communities either through our membership in these communities (India for Lanjewar and Poland for Romaniuk) or via international volunteering (India, Brazil, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Mexico, and Guatemala). International volunteering as a method of research allows for an in vivo study of community life and observation of organic communal responses to homelessness. A common conclusion from the authors' research and experiences is that societal responses to homelessness depend on the level of poverty, community assets, state and regional policies, and local traditions for assisting the vulnerable. One key lesson is that communities tend to self-organize to compensate for the lack of governmental responses to homelessness. Among the robust responses to homelessness is the creation of slums – a phenomenon on which we place special emphasis.

There are no reliable measures of homelessness, especially in low-income countries with large populations. For the purpose of this article, we drew data from the World Population Review (worldpopulationreview.com). Measures of homelessness as a human condition depend on many factors, such as climate change, ongoing conflicts, post-colonial histories, population size, and national income level. Our selection of countries to visit and discuss depended on how the world media presents their problems and successes. The article by Daniil Filipenco: "Homelessness statistics in the world: causes and facts" published on Dec 13, 2023, in Development Aid (https://www.developmentaid.org/) is one of our resources we utilized.

Before presenting our thoughts concerning the role of slums in contemporary discussions of homelessness, it is important to reiterate a point made in Part I of our work: the best approach to ending homelessness is investment in supportive public housing. In the long term, this approach is cheaper than the cost of homelessness [12]. It is also more cost-effective to treat the root causes of homelessness – such as substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness – to prevent many people from becoming unhoused [13, 14]. Many interventions aimed at assessing people experiencing homelessness are unsuccessful because of stigma and social exclusion [15]. Efforts to change the public image of homelessness might therefore be the most important approach. In practice, however, policies addressing homelessness are often dic-

tated by public demands to make unhoused people disappear from the public space.

There are, however, situations in which an entire country is devastated by an earthquake, war, or pandemic, and there are not enough resources to help millions of unhoused people without a livelihood. In such situations, only organized international aid can provide relief. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti exemplifies this situation, as does the response of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). What is most interesting about the assistance provided by USAID is that it was not simply an offer of money, food, and shelter; it also included assistance to community organizations with the aim of eliminating the impoverished country's social problems and promoting long-term development [16].

International discourse

Our knowledge concerning how different countries prevent and work toward ending homelessness is based on our encounters with professionals from various countries and visits to their places of work. We found out that, to understand people's approach to homelessness and proposed models of assistance, it is necessary to know the history of that country, its traditions, and the social capital of its activists. What works in one country may not be acceptable in another, as the integration of models into the broader social system might be different.

In most countries, national, regional, and local authorities develop national strategies to eradicate homelessness in an attempt to help the unhoused. In some countries, such as Mexico and Guatemala, there are no unified national programs. In Guatemala, 50% of the population lives below the poverty line, and homelessness is a considerable social problem. In emergency situations, the government may offer shelters and humanitarian aid, but the main responsibility for helping the unhoused is left to local communities.

It is not easy to evaluate each national and regional program and its effectiveness. Each of these programs exists within a distinct historical, cultural, and economic context. It is easier to observe how local communities respond to the unhoused people living among them and how those individuals attempt to improve their living conditions. We need to ask questions such as the following: Are there government offices where people in need may apply for benefits, or are unhoused people left alone with their own resources? Our goal was to study how national policies and practices are translated into shared knowledge on how to assist the unhoused. We spoke with both those who helped people who were unhoused and those who received the help. The most interesting were community organizations, ranging from very small initiatives in Tanzania to much larger ones with offices located in neighboring countries (e.g., MORE in Zimbabwe). Each of these organizations uses a different model of assistance, specific to the nature of the community and the culture in which the program was developed.

In Poland, during the Soviet-style economy, the government constructed housing identified by many Western publicists as "vertical slums" [4]. Similar public housing in France and Great Britain (built in the Brutalist style) was demolished after public outcry that living conditions in these buildings were substandard. In contrast, in Poland, many examples of such housing are still functioning, and are considered very livable and even desirable. This is possible because, perhaps surprisingly, they were built according to Le Corbusier's ideal of a functional city, with tall and compact buildings, significant green space between them, and all necessary institutions and services located nearby. Housing was relatively low-cost and available to many people. Today, in a capitalist economy, the cost of new housing is much higher, and housing is often built with far less space between buildings for green areas or essential services. However, new apartments have significantly more living space than those built in countries with Soviet-style economies, so the old apartments are now used mostly for single or double occupancy.

Affordable housing in Poland is the responsibility of the national government and local municipalities which offer different forms of social housing [17]. In general, there are many governmental and non-governmental (NGO) services for the homeless in Poland [18]. The recent inflow of millions of refugees from Ukraine following the February 2022 Russian invasion tested these services. Many individuals invited refugees into their homes [19] as the first emotional response to the consequences of war. This response reflected a general lack of trust in governmental solutions to the struggles of individuals, stemming from decades of communist rule. As a result, communities tried to respond in an organic way. We visited two programs assisting the homeless organized by religious (Roman Catholic) entities. We spoke with Adriana Porowska from the Camillian Mission of Social Welfare and Janusz Sukiennik from the Caritas program Damy Radę ("We can do it"). The goals of both programs are to address addiction and mental health conditions through recovery, education and vocational skills, sustainable employment and independence, and the restoration of full participation in society. One of Janusz Sukiennik's model approaches is the application of so-called training housing, where individuals live before obtaining permanent housing. It is a very successful method but difficult to implement on a large scale within homeless populations. Both of the above-mentioned non-profit organizations were founded by social workers and professionals whose mission is to assist people who are unhoused. Adriana Porowska and Janusz Sukiennik are community leaders and advocates for social change. Janusz Sukiennik organized a conference to which he invited faculty from our school, specialists in recovery, and Julia Wygnańska, a local specialist on the Housing First model, to discuss international approaches to homelessness. The tension between the "recovery first and housing second" approach and the "Housing First" model [20] remains present in many discussions [21].

Brazil is known for favelas, large areas composed of many small, often self-built structures or shacks, constructed by people who cannot afford living in cities. In Rio de Janeiro, 25% of the local population lives in favelas. According to the 2022 Brazilian Census, 8.1% of the Brazilian population resides in favelas. There are many descriptions of the favela phenomenon. Some portray them as places filled with gangs, crime, and narcotics, while others see them as communities in which residents

self-organize and assemble all necessary services to improve their living conditions [22]. One of the authors of this article worked as a volunteer in one of Rio de Janeiro's favelas and participated in a community-based, self-organized system of care. It is worth noting that the favela community cooperates with an international volunteer organization to recruit English teachers who can provide free instruction to local activists. Volunteers also take part in creating gardens and landscaping the favela's public places.

We heard the story of two brothers from a favela: one was killed by a local gang, and his younger brother, Alan Duarte, went on to create a center for the favela's youth where they could learn self-defense and boxing. The name of his NGO organization is Abraço Campeão (Embrace Champions) and it is based in Complexo do Alemão in Rio de Janeiro. The organization was featured in the documentary *The Good Fight*, which received an award at the Tribeca Film Festival. Alan Duarte is very proud of his community achievements and a great example of the power of leadership.

In Moshi, Tanzania, when Romaniuk requested to visit impoverished areas, he was taken to a part of the city that was visibly poor and was told that he would not be safe walking there alone. This is a common belief about places where people live in desperate conditions. Romaniuk also visited equally poor areas with single-room houses, where sleeping places were on the ground, built from clay and palm leaves. These were safe areas, and often families of single women with children lived there. Neighbors helped with food and childcare, and nonprofit community organizations offered support. Deogratius Peter, the executive director of one of such organizations, Naishi Foundation, (https://www.naishifoundation.org/), remarked that he is grateful for the support he receives from organizations arranging help from international volunteers. Peter also developed a tourist office that organizes safaris in the Serengeti and Ngorongoro, and trips to Kilimanjaro and other parks around Moshi. He maintains connections with the Department of Social Work at Mwenge Catholic University, and he works on developing collaborations with the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University, where the authors of this article studied and work. Together with volunteers, he is responsible for helping the local community with their food and health needs, and for organizing financial support through his tourist initiatives. His engagement with local and international academic social workers contributes to the sustainability of these projects and helps ensure they receive the recognition they deserve.

Whether in Brazil or Tanzania, poor neighborhoods may be either places where crime and drugs prevail or well-organized communities supported by local leaders [22]. Those who have seen examples of well-organized poor neighborhoods believe that homelessness in low-income countries cannot be directly compared to homelessness in developed countries, as community assets, financial policies, resources, and needs in these two different kinds of places are so dissimilar in both type and scale. It should also be noted that the cultures of many countries with large homeless populations can often be described as collectivist, meaning that society places greater value on the fate of the group than on the individual. As a result, relationships tend to form more easily among people living in similar conditions in these countries, compared with those in more "developed" countries with more individualistic cultures, where unhoused individuals often wander through the streets of city centers [11, 22, 23].

Providing even limited assistance in low-income countries has a greater impact than applying the same effort in developed countries. For example, Romaniuk volunteered with a private organization in Zimbabwe named MORE – Community Foundation, which serves as a community builder in Zimbabwe and South Africa. According to its representative, Norman Mutirwara, the foundation operates according to four pillars of its mission: education, support for local businesses, improvement of living standards, and interaction between humans and animals (nature). Romaniuk observed the foundation's collaboration with local communities and how its nature-based approach affected their environment. Many community organizations like MORE – private, nonprofit groups in countries of the so-called "Global South", rely on international support obtained through international voluntarism and tourism. Such voluntarism is sometimes criticized as being driven by a "savior complex", but when the community itself requests this support in the form of organic work, then such interaction results in a greater sense of appreciation and partnership rather than feelings of superiority [10]. Writing about nature-based solutions, Santos [24] likewise emphasized the importance of voluntarism and community-based tourism in partnering with favela-type communities in Brazil.

In all of the countries the authors visited in an effort to recognize local efforts to reduce homelessness, they observed the self-organization of communities using their own assets and social capital. These organizations often reached out to international communities to access their resources and/or to learn from experiences in other settings. A good example is provided by communities in Quetzaltenango (Xela), Guatemala (entremundos.org), which requested support in many areas such as education, health, human rights, and development. Regarding homelessness in Guatemala, social workers are most concerned about unhoused children or those at risk of becoming homeless. Public health workers likewise appreciated international cooperation in responding to this need [25, 26].

Brazil and India

In the article "Slums, Favelas, and Urban Villages", Ren [22] described three similar concepts of housing utilized by people who cannot afford to live in large cities in India, Brazil, and China. Unhoused individuals tend to gather together to protect themselves and form communities; these communities eventually become phenomena of their own. Clusters of their occupants may make up a large proportion of a city's residents; their settlements are glaring evidence of the ineffectiveness of urban governance [27]. Politicians are often compelled to deal with their existence because of the high value of the land they occupy and the voting rights held by their residents.

The approach of society and its leaders to slums varies by country. In India, there is a tradition of demolishing

slums with promises to relocate their inhabitants. Such processes are always traumatic and often worse than anticipated; relocations, if they occur at all, are to places far away from areas known to the inhabitants of the slum, from their jobs, and from the social capital they have already developed. Rather than eliminating homelessness, the demolition of slums frequently leads to an increase in the number of people living on the streets [27]. In China, where the government uses its power differently, urban villages (the equivalent of slums) are demolished without any organized relocation of their residents.

The most interesting is the case of Brazil. The self-organization and self-reliance of favelas, combined with the potential of the community's political power (through voting) and their capacity to negotiate with governing bodies, has created a markedly different approach to the existence of these communities. Instead of demolition (which unfortunately may still happen), the main approach is incremental upgrading of their living areas. The city may help favelas through access to electricity, water, and sanitation, thereby creating pathways for their fuller integration into the urban system. In this respect, favelas are a great example of community development through their assets and social capital, which translates into better negotiation capabilities [8, 9]. Governing bodies, instead of destroying people's efforts to create their living space, could use their strengths to address the shortage of affordable housing for all city residents.

It needs to be acknowledged that researchers from other countries also advocate for the maintenance and upgrading of slums. Among them are Banerjee [28], Harrison and Sharma [29] in India, and Asiamah [30] in Ghana. In his work, Asiamah described different slum policies in Africa and grouped them into the following categories: benign neglect, forced eviction, resettlement programs, and slum upgrading. Asiamah [30] provided the example that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Ghana decided to demolish slums to combat the spread of the virus, resulting in more than 1,000 slum dwellers becoming homeless. He discussed optimal policies concerning slums in Ghana with policymakers and residents both outside and inside slums. Proponents of demolition argued that the main reasons were to limit space for criminal activity, beautify the city, and improve public health conditions. As a result of community discussions, Asiamah advocates for the incremental upgrading of slums rather than their clearance, and calls for more discussion on this issue.

There are obvious problems regarding who will pay for upgrading slums and concerns about the viability of upgrading as a solution. Few people wish to live in small, rough housing [31]. However, asking residents of the slums to pay for it would create another barrier to a path out of poverty. Society must therefore examine how much homelessness costs everyone and how harnessing the energy and motivation of people to leave homelessness will help lower its costs.

Mexico City

Mexico City is one of the largest urban agglomerations in the world. According to the World Population Review,

in 2024 the population of Greater Mexico City reached 22.5 million, with less than half of this population located in Mexico City proper. Mexico City has a different socio-political organization than the surrounding areas of its agglomeration, which belong to the State of Mexico and Hidalgo. This difference in socio-political organization is important to understand the conditions of people experiencing homelessness. While the situation of unhoused individuals in Mexico City is considered difficult, with only minimal support from government [32], conditions in the surrounding municipalities of Greater Mexico City are dramatically worse.

The author of this article met with Mateo Rivera and other members of the nonprofit organization Mi Valedor, which supports people who live on streets. Mexico City has a significant amount of substandard housing where poor people may live, but the real slums are located outside the city limits, within Greater Mexico City (called "the state part of the city"). Social workers and advocates from Mi Valedor explained that all they can do is to help those on the street with basic needs such as food, clothes, health care, and income generation. They provide a safe, friendly space for them during daytime, offering a sense of community and belonging. The model of help presented by Mateo Rivera from Mi Valedor is a form of harm reduction that does not offer housing but rather supports people on a path toward self-sufficiency in achieving income and housing. The process might take months or years, but the organization avoids creating barriers or limits for their support. Interestingly, Arturo Soto, the director of Mi Valedor and, also, an artist, says that one of the tools for building community is developing creativity and appreciation for local art among the unhoused.

There was limited discussion concerning slums. People who experienced homelessness in "the state part of the city" presented a vision of a lawless area with millions of people living in dire conditions. Residents of this region, some of whom were born and raised there, said that they had never received any help from the government, not even from the police when they were looking for safety. They stated that people living in "the state part of the city" come from different walks of life: those affected by poverty, immigrants, the homeless, and individuals with different physical and mental disabilities or social exclusion. All of them have significant barriers and limitations in changing their life conditions. Those who are able to leave their environment and reach organizations like Mi Valedor have a chance to change their lives, even at the cost of sleeping on the streets of Mexico City. This is why people say that those experiencing homelessness in Mexico City are relatively privileged compared with other unhoused people in the greater metropolitan area.

Voluntarism

As mentioned earlier, international volunteers represent one way in which the international community can support unhoused populations in low-income countries. The best example is the work of the United Nations (UN) toward Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (sdgs.un.org/goals). Any work toward SDGs, especially toward Goals 1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere) and 11 (make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sus-

tainable), helps with worldwide problems of homelessness. There are many ways to motivate people to gain interest in international travel, including professional engagement, appreciation of the beauty of the world and nature, a genuine mission to help the disadvantaged, or opportunities for self-discovery and self-development [33, 34]. The UN also advocates that international tourism can be helpful in achieving SDGs when integrated with the goals of the host community. In essence, any motivation that brings people to other countries with the aim of improving lives brings us closer to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals and eventually to the eradication of homelessness.

Through his travels to several countries as both a volunteer and tourist, Romaniuk learned about the assets of each community he visited while observing how those assets are utilized to benefit communities. Tourists have different attitudes; some are annoyed by local gifts made in China, while others are genuinely interested in the lives of local residents. Tourist-volunteers may be involved in their host countries through activities such as gardening or by applying their professional skills and knowledge as doctors or teachers. However, it has to be stated that in low-income countries and impoverished communities, money spent there is of great significance. Communities usually know what they need and how to achieve what is needed. They know their conditions and how to improve them, but often lack the financial means to do so. Money is not something shameful but simply an important element of the transactional relationship between tourists and residents of a host country. In Tanzania, for example, hosts share with tourists the beauty of Kilimanjaro, serve local coffee, and guide visitors on safaris. It is the responsibility of tourists to pay for these experiences. We observed how the money received was then utilized to support local residents, orphans, the sick, and the homeless. If tourists feel that there is something problematic about this transaction [33], then they should pay more.

Voluntarism and community building based on strengths and assets are well-established forces that can improve living standards and are present in all of the countries discussed here. They exist in developing countries, in poor neighborhoods, and in favelas among populations excluded from formal city systems. Interestingly, people from low-income communities may reach out to the academic world to present their problems to researchers, educators, and students. Similarly, academics engage with poor neighborhoods to learn about their self-management methods [35]. Mateo Rivera helps the homeless in Mexico City, but he is also an academic working on his doctoral dissertation. With the UN Sustainable Development Goals in mind, the role of the academic is to establish what works and what does not for the people they seek to support. To do so, academics must observe these communities, experience them firsthand (even if only briefly), and try to understand the specific cultural and social contexts that differ from their own daily lives.

Conclusion

The material presented here suggests that improving living standards in highly populated, low-income countries requires research into, and understanding of, the forces that give rise to slums, both horizontal and vertical, favelas, and one-room houses built from clay. Every community

and country has different land and banking policies that need to be recognized. Cultural, political, and social solidarity traditions are also of great importance when discussing pathways toward ending homelessness. When focusing on poverty and the perceived impossibility of ending homelessness, we often forget about the strengths of the people living in slums. Immersed in an environment of slums, each impoverished community has its own assets, resources, and motivation to move beyond homelessness. Some of these resources are of interest to people from other countries. Professionals, volunteers, and tourists are willing to support communities that build upon such assets, and they can create an international movement to protect what is valuable in the world. People living in slums can work where they are located. They want education, vocational training, and good health, using the services of their own communities. We suggest that the best way to achieve affordable housing is through community development based on local assets and through the creation of pathways to reintegration with the rest of society. Rather than focusing on how much ending homelessness costs, societies need to explore how much could be saved by ending homelessness and relieving human suffering. To ensure human rights, the UN Sustainable Development Goals should be prioritized as guiding objectives in countries around the world.

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